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PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND IMAGINATION IN RURAL THAILAND

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Abstract

The transformation of rural areas from zones of production to arenas of consumption is well established in the literature focusing on the developed world. Less so the developing world. The paper opens by providing a critique of the construction of the rural idyll in Thailand, tracing this back to what is sometimes suggested to be the first piece of Thai literature, an inscription dated to 1292. The discussion then turns to show how this construction of a (imagined) rural past infuses ideas about the present and the policies promoted by local NGOs and others. The consumption of rural Thailand by new classes, tacitly embodying this imagined past, is exemplified by reference to two case studies; a hotel with a 'working' rice farm and an elite school. The infiltration of new groups into rural Thailand, with new agendas has, in some instances, created tensions while also providing new opportunities for traditional rural classes. The paper concludes by considering, using Thailand as an exemplar, whether understandings of trajectories of rural change based largely on work undertaken in the North can be applied to countries of the South.

Introduction – rural scholarship in the developing and developed worlds

Rural studies in the developed world has undergone a revolution in the last two or three decades. A central theme in this change of direction has involved a conscious effort to take the farmyard out of rural studies, shifting the focus from issues of agricultural production to questions of rural consumption, and from farming to non-farm pursuits. Without such a change of direction, some scholars suggested, rural studies was at risk of dying – or at least being subsumed within political-economy studies with their roots in industrial geography scholarship. A central reason for this change in emphasis, which can be dated from the mid-1960s, was a recognition that rural areas, as coherent economic and social spaces, were fragmenting and diverging (see Ibery, 1998). Rural society was increasingly composed of people with different, and sometimes conflicting interests. New patterns of alliance and competition were emerging between producers and consumers of rural space. Furthermore,

the centrality of farming in the rural economy and rural people's livelihoods (which are not the same things) was under threat as non-farm activities infiltrated the countryside and the delocalisation of work advanced (Mormont, 1990, pp. 30-1; Cloke 1998). "...The central organizing principles established in postwar times" Marsden writes of the developed world "...have been largely overtaken by the tide of a rural (and urban) restructuring process which has been both economically and socially driven" (Marsden, 1998, p. 15). This has taken much rural studies scholarship in the developed world, and particularly in the UK, down a post-productivist road.¹ These arguments are well-rehearsed in the literature.

But this change of direction has failed to make much of an impact in developing world rural studies. The reasons are clear. For while agriculture in rural areas of the developed world has become a marginal activity supporting a minority of inhabitants in the countryside, in the developing world agriculture remains – on the face of it at least – the fulcrum on which the great majority of rural livelihoods are balanced. But this belief that rural=agricultural in the developing is being increasingly challenged. Work on 'de-agrarianisation' in Africa (Bryceson, 1996; Bryceson and Jamal, 1997), Latin America (Preston, 1992; Zoomers and Kleinpenning, 1996), and Asia (Rigg, 2001; Franks et al., 1999) is already substantial.² There is a second explanation for the persistence of a farming perspective in developing areas rural studies. Namely, the belief that farming is not just an economic activity but a 'way of life' that bestows a distinctive character on rural societies. In short, rural studies, rural sociology, and rural development are alive and well in the developing world. To a significant extent, scholarly 'advances' as well as rural transformations in the developed world seem to have passed such areas by.

This paper does not aim to correct this imbalance. Indeed there is a case that the reason why post-productivist rural scholarship on the developing world has yet to make much of a mark is because it is out of step with rural realities in the poor world. While we would not wish to argue that agriculture has become, in toto, a marginal activity we do believe that the overwhelming focus on farming and farmers, both socially and economically, has meant that scholars have tended to overlook some nascent but nonetheless highly significant changes in rural spaces in the poorer, majority world. Furthermore, a failure sufficiently to appreciate the scale and pace of change has led to misinterpretations of the bases of agricultural transformations.³

To this end, the paper sets out to achieve three things, drawing on the experience of Thailand. First, to investigate the construction of Thai rurality, tracing this back to the late 13th century. Second to show how this image and historical construction has insinuated itself into scholarly and applied views of rural areas and people, the problems they face, and how best to solve them. And finally, to demonstrate, using this imagined rurality, how agricultural production and rural society has been coopted (from within and without) for purposes of consumption. These three elements of the paper cover a period of more than seven centuries and take the discussion from the realms of distant history and issues of nation-building through to emerging evidence in support of a gradual shift from production in the countryside to consumption of the countryside. The importance of the past in the present is illuminated through a discussion of the way in which Thai scholars and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have used constructions of 'tradition' to make a case for a 'new' development.

We suggest that many of the issues concentrating the minds of scholars working on the developed world are applicable to the developing world – even if the contexts are self-evidently different. Moreover the developing world offers particular lessons for, and insights into, models of change based on a reading of the Northern experience. While we do not reject entirely the transferability of such models to the South, we do suggest (based on the Thai experience) that this cannot be done wholesale and without recognition of the particular historical trajectories and embedded social and economic structures that inform processes of change in any particular place. While certain indicators of a post-productivist countryside – organic farming, pluriactivity, and the growing power of environmental NGOs, for example – are to be found in rural areas of the South, the meaning of these indicators is importantly different. Therefore their presence should not be taken to mean that a process directly akin to that marked out for the North is occurring.

What – and who – is rural Thailand?

Work on ‘the rural’ in the developed world has explored the extent to which the rural idyll has been constructed as a counterpoint to urban/industrial life and work. “The concept of the rural”, Mormont writes, “evolved by distinguishing the rural and the agricultural, and by defining the rural in relation to the social and cultural context created by industrial development...” (Mormont, 1990, p. 22). A similar, but less well documented (at least in the mainstream academic literature) debate has been underway in parts of the developing world and, in this instance, in Thailand.

In Thailand, contemporary constructions of the rural can be linked back in time to the so-called Inscription no. 1 of 1292 which describes a bountiful land where rice and fish abounded, ruled by a great and benevolent monarch (of course), King Ramkhamhaeng (?1279-1298). This description is widely regarded as the first work of Thai literature (Manas Chitakasem 1999, p. 47) and has been paraded by some as Thailand’s first Constitution (see Seni Pramoj, 1990, p. 23). The opening lines are memorised by every Thai schoolchild:

‘In the time of King Ramkhamhaeng, this land of Sukhothai is thriving. In the water there is fish, in the fields there is rice.’

The inscription paints a picture of a righteous monarch ruling wisely in the interests of his people over a bounteous land.⁴ The King ‘taxes not his people’, whoever plants groves of betel or areca ‘unto him shall they belong’, ‘whoever wants to play, plays... whoever wants to laugh, laughs ... whoever want to sing, sings’. And so on. The words of the inscription have also been embraced by the academic community (both Thai and non-Thai), reflected in the fact that the ‘In the water there is fish...’ lines must be used to grace the opening pages of more books and more chapters of books on Thailand than any other single quote. For Seni Pramoj the inscription ‘bears no false witness’ (1990, p. 26) and its veracity and honesty are beyond reproach.

Notwithstanding Seni’s view, the 1990s has seen a heated debate over whether the inscription is authentic, or a forgery. ‘Discovered’ by the future King Mongkut when he was a prince in 1833, it served to prove to the encroaching colonial powers (Thailand is the only country of Southeast Asia never to have been colonised) that Thailand was not just an empty space but a legitimate kingdom with a long and glorious history that deserved to be treated with some respect, if not as an equal. Subsequently, the inscription became a key building block of Thai history – and a central column in the edifice of Thai nationhood. As Manas Chitakasem writes of the forgery allegations, they “sent shock waves throughout the community of Thai scholars and scholars of Thailand alike”. This was not just an arcane academic debate over whether an inscription was engraved in the late 13th century during Thailand’s Golden Period or was a 19th century forgery designed to serve contemporary political ends. To quote Manas again: “The controversy shook the very foundations of Thai knowledge, Thai studies, Thai-ness and even the whole Thai nation” (1999, p. 51). From the perspective of the conceptualisation of rural Thailand the inscription represents the starting point for scores of papers, books, newspaper articles and speeches that use what we would suggest is an imagined past to cast doubt on and to question the present and, importantly, to provide a template from which a more sustainable, egalitarian, moral and ‘Thai’ future can be inscribed.

Perhaps the most influential such academic publication is Chatthip Nartsupha’s slim *The Thai village economy in the past (Sethakit mubaan Thai nai odiit)*, originally published in Thai in 1984 with an English translation released in 1999. The book begins with the simple sentence “Thai peoples are rice growers” (1999, p. 9) and then quotes the 12th century Chiang Rung (Chiang Hung) chronicles: ‘wherever there is water, there is the Thai’ (1999, p. 9). While Chatthip’s book is, ostensibly, a reinterpretation of historical change in Thailand it was quickly taken up by radical academics and NGO activists. In particular it was used to highlight the perceived shortcomings of the modernisation process in Thailand by unfavourably comparing contemporary rural life (unequal and dependent) with rural life in the

past (meagre but egalitarian and self-sufficient). This unfavourable comparison has been used to support – practically – and inform – intellectually – a ‘new’, village-centred approach to development known as the Community Culture school of thought, or Wattanatham Chumchon. Chatthip’s book represents the ideological and theoretical heart of this new rural development ethos and it, in turn, has guided the work and practice of a good number of Thai NGOs (see Chatthip Nartsupha, 1986; 1991; 1996; Rigg, 1991; 1993; Hewison, 1993; 1999). It is significant that one of the more widely read development texts in this field is Seri Phongphit’s *Back to the roots* (1986) which makes much play of the need to see the ‘answer’ to the problems of the present, in the past. In this way Chatthip’s treatise, fewer than 100 pages in length, has become much more than a seminal academic tract. It is one of the few scholarly works that has had a direct impact on the ‘real’ Thai world and people’s lives. The appeal of Chatthip’s work in Thailand is partly because he maps out a Thai (re)interpretation of historical and social change, one that self-consciously rejects re-hashed Western perspectives and conceptual models.⁵

Constructing the rural past, interpreting the rural present

The core of Chatthip’s argument framed in *The Thai village economy in the past* is that villages – and village communities – are ‘primordial’ and that the state and capitalism have intruded into these communities against the will of the people (‘dragged into the market system’, as he puts it, page 50). While villagers resisted this incursion and the subsistence economy persisted for far longer than is usually thought, they were ultimately powerless, and exploitation arose. The former subsistence (‘in the beginning things had no price’), community-oriented, class-less and undifferentiated village society was, in the process, undermined. While the book does not offer any explicit suggestions as to how a more people-centred mode of development might be achieved in Thailand,⁶ the telling critique of change is regarded as an indictment of what has happened to traditional rural communities as they have been infiltrated by the state and the market.

Chatthip’s laudable aim was to overturn the smug prevailing historical discourse that essentially saw the country as being guided by a series of prescient monarchs or ‘Lords of Life’. The people were denied an autonomous history and were instead defined only in terms of their role as loyal, dutiful and grateful subjects. As historian Thongchai Winichakul suggests, all *chao ban nok* – rural folk – were just *chao ban nok*, an undifferentiated mass of ignorant, simple, uneducated peasants, an economic resource to be exploited, but not worth understanding (2000, p. 536). They were, as he says, the ‘Others Within’ (page 537). However, in eschewing the established Royalist interpretation of Thailand’s history, and turning to a peasant-based history, it could be argued that Chatthip and his followers simply replaced one imagined construction with another.⁷

But, imagined or not, and as noted above, Chatthip’s views have been embraced by the NGO community and, more latterly, by many of those in the Thai establishment and mainstream. Significantly, in the wake of Thailand’s economic crisis and with the explicit support of the King of Thailand, there has emerged a reinvigorated effort to create a ‘self-sufficient economy’ (*sethakit phor piang*) based on integrated agriculture. Once again, the vision of the traditional Thai village ‘community’ is used as the template on which this new, reborn, rurality is to be founded. In his 70th birthday address in December 1997 (five months into Thailand’s economic crisis) the King of Thailand said:

“Being a [economic] tiger is not important. What is important is to have enough to eat and to live, and to have an economy which provides enough to eat and live. ... If we can change back to a self-sufficient economy, not complete, even not as much as half, perhaps just a quarter, we can survive. ... We need to move backwards in order to move forwards” (quoted in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker 2000, p. 193).

The King’s vision, along with the applied and academic work of scholars and development workers like Chatthip Nartsupha (1991; 1999), Seri Phongphit (1986; 1989; 1990), Kitahara (1996), Pinit Ratanakul and U Kyaw Than (1990), Uraivan Tan-Kim-Yong (1995) and

others, has been characterised as a 'localism discourse' that "asserts the significance of the rural community as an opposition to economic growth..." (Hewison, 1999, p. 10; see also Hewison 2001). Part of this localism discourse (now generally known as the New Localism) emphasises the role of the traditional village as a self-sufficient and self-reliant economic unit. But, and significantly, the traditional village is also framed as an ethical social and cultural community where economics is subservient to other considerations.

A key word in the debate over the real rural Thailand is 'community'. There are a number of threads to this. First of all the focus on community emphasises (self-evidently) the communalism of rural life and shifts attention away from the individual and the household. Furthermore, and second, in making the focus the community rather than the individual the emphasis also shifts from economy (individual wants) to society (group needs) and the cultural composition of rural Thailand. Taking this sequence of associations a little further, and third, the emphasis on community and society/culture also draws a neat line between urban/industrial society and its articulation with the global economy and rural/agricultural society and its links with tradition. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the shift from community to individual, impelled by modernisation, is seen to be the root cause of the problems evident in rural areas ranging from rampant consumerism to environmental decline, rising inequalities, and social decay. So we have, for example, Chuchai Supawong stating, during the economic crisis that "communities are the heart and the answer [to the economic malaise]. If they are strong, the country will survive" (Bangkok Post, 1998). Bello *et al.*'s analysis of Thailand's 'tragedy' also dwells on the destructive way in which the city has insinuated its way into rural society (1998, pp. 135-138).

It is important to recognise that while the geographical focus of this New Localism is squarely on rural areas, rural society and rural production, it has its origins in the imaginations, ideas and ideologies of a largely urban-based, middle class. It also incorporates a nationalist agenda, sometimes explicit and sometimes tacit, that links the decline of rural areas, society and production to Thailand's incorporation into the global context and, more particularly, to the role of multinational corporations, the IMF and the World Bank (see Hewison 2001).⁸ There is, perhaps inevitably, a good deal of confusion – or at least difference of opinion – over what 'self-sufficiency' and 'self-reliance' mean in the context of the localism discourse. Some see it in absolutist, almost anarchic terms: self-sufficiency and self-reliance at the level of the village and the more, it would seem, the better (see the discussion, for example, in Chatthip Nartsupha 1991). Other, more pragmatic observers (and the King can be counted one of these, as can Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker 2000), merely call for a greater consideration of local resources, technologies and capabilities where 'local' can mean, as appropriate, the village, sub-district, district or province, up to the national scale. Another theme in the writings of these more moderate localists is their call for a 'moral' market to replace the amorality of the capitalist system.

It would be wrong to write that there has been no reaction from Thais against either Chatthip's interpretation of the past (and implied model for the future) or the King's proposal as to the best way forward. But it is notable that most of the intellectual challenge has come from Western scholars writing in English. Historians, economists, anthropologists, rural sociologists and geographers have questioned whether villages were ever self-reliant and subsistence-oriented, whether they could be characterised as 'moral' economies, and whether they were corporate and egalitarian (see Terweil, 1989; Bowie, 1992; Koizumi, 1992; Vandergeest, 1991; Rigg, 1994). Indeed some have questioned whether the 'village', as an identifiable unit, ever existed at all until the administrative reforms of the early 20th century (Kemp, 1988; 1989; 1991; Hoadley and Gunnarsson, 1996; Rigg, 1994). Critical comment on the New Localism has also been concentrated among Western scholars (see, for example, Hewison 2001).

But while some academics may have challenged the entrenched views of rural history and society, there is an ingrained belief held among rural (and urban) people in Thailand that these two groups of people – country dwellers and urbanites – are different. Mills, for example, quotes a textile factory worker from the countryside living in Bangkok:

“People in the city and people in the village aren’t the same. City people, Bangkok people, you can’t trust them, they only think of themselves. In the city people don’t know each other. I’ve lived in this room for many months now and I still don’t know the neighbors. In the village, I know everyone. We grow up together, we’re all relatives and friends together. I know where they come from, their background. I can trust them.” (Mills, 1997, p. 48).

In saying the above, Mills’ textile worker is tapping into this rich seam of tradition and propaganda regarding how Thais think about themselves and their country. Nor is this just embedded in the popular imagination. As noted above, it is also part-and-parcel of academic and political debate, it is reflected in Thai literature, in newspaper articles, and has become a guiding principal of the development efforts of Thai NGO activists. From their earliest years in school, when children are taught that farmers are the ‘backbone’ of the nation, the special character of farmers, farming and rural areas is stressed.

As will have become clear from the tenor of this discussion, we are doubtful whether these visions truly offer a realistic alternative to the present trajectory of change in Thailand, even in the aftermath of the Asian crisis. In this sense we are more inclined to side with the views of Thai scholars such as Ji Ungpakorn who see such visions as utopian and, ultimately, naïve (see Reynolds, 2001).

There is not space here to explain more than briefly why we take this position. However, and in summary: we have doubts about the historical veracity of these visions; the absorption capacity of rural areas and agriculture; about the desire among ‘ordinary’ people to re-embrace farming and tradition; and, indeed, about the interpretation placed on the livelihood-effects of the Asian crisis. There is no doubt that rural areas of Thailand did become a ‘safety valve’ for some individuals and households but this hardly amounted to a fundamental transformation in the trajectory of change, or in the evolving patterns of livelihood in the countryside. Rather than going ‘back to the roots’, marginal rural households coped with the crisis by cutting back on consumption expenditure, economising, selling assets and drawing on their savings, and by desperately searching for alternative non-farm work, perhaps in the informal sector or in small-scale enterprises. They may even have tried to squeeze just a little more production and income from their farms by raising labour inputs or changing crops or crop mixes. But the notion that they could return to their (often sub-livelihood) land holdings just was not an option in the majority of cases (for discussions of rural Thailand during the crisis see Rigg, 2002; Rigg and Sakunee Nattapoolwat, 2001; World Bank, 1999, 2000; Parnwell, 2002).

Consuming imaginations

The discussion so far has focused on how the past has been used by radical development workers and academics – and with the crisis, many mainstream commentators too, including the King of Thailand – to arrive at a more sensitive, sustainable and appropriate (all key words in the alternative development lexicon) future for the Thai countryside. But there is a second area where notions of the rural idyll have found fertile ground: in terms of the consumption of rural spaces. It is to this theme that we now turn.

Notions of the rural idyll, as noted above, are primarily articulated by urban-based, and usually middle class academics, journalists and politicians (as in the West). The Thai intelligentsia, in other words. As these people, or their acolytes, colonise the countryside they are armed with this vision of the past. Housing estates are collectively called *mubaan* or ‘villages’; hotels draw on the past in their promotional literature and in their architecture; even expensive preparatory schools for Thailand’s elite self-consciously model themselves on this imagined past. In these ways, the past is being used by non-traditional rural classes to justify their presence and to make themselves, in a sense, more traditional and more authentic than the farmers who they are, in some cases, displacing from the countryside (see below). The irony is that these new rural residents can, at times, serve to undermine the farm economy. Just as in the developed world, visions of the rural past tend to be selectively

embraced by new rural classes to build what they believe is a better, and a more authentic rurality.

However it is not only elites who have turned to tradition to meet contemporary ends. The tourist industry in Thailand, and especially that element geared to taking tourists to visit the hill 'tribes' of the north, rests on maintaining 'authenticity' in the face of rapid and deep-seated economic and social change. Hill peoples fully recognise that their tourist value is embedded in maintaining tradition – even if it is a fiction – even while the industry generates the funds that permit such people to escape tradition and embrace modernity.

The invasion of the countryside

The infiltration of new classes into the countryside, while still not yet a process which has general currency, is sufficiently pronounced and well advanced in Thailand to be worthy of study. The kingdom's economic boom, rapidly improving transport facilities, and the sense that the quality of life in urban areas has deteriorated along with the environment, led many of the country's new middle classes in the 1990s to seek to live out of town. Around Bangkok and regional centres like Chiang Mai and Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima), rural housing estates have colonised the countryside. Following in the wake of the housing estates have come shopping centres, schools, recreational facilities and hotels. The result has been, in some areas, a fundamental restructuring of rural areas and rural economies. Farmers, enticed by offers that were simply too good to turn down, sold their land to property developers. Either they took the money and ran – to re-establish themselves in more peripheral locations where agricultural land was cheaper – or stayed put and found non-farm work and/or lived off their capital. Ban Lek, for example, saw land prices escalate by 2,300% as it was drawn within the orbit of the city of Chiang Mai (Ritchie, 1993, 1996a; 1996b). In the mid-1970s when the Japanese scholar Shigeharu Tanabe worked in Ban Lek it was a village of farmers (Tanabe, 1994) with almost nine in ten households engaged, primarily, in farming. By the early 1990s those engaged in agriculture were in a minority and those whose primary source of livelihood was farming represented an even smaller share of the total. As Ritchie writes: "Although the village is in a rural setting, the people and households who are involved in agriculture are in the minority" (1996b, pp. 123-126). Today there are more than a few rural villages around cities like Chiang Mai where agriculture is so thinly represented as to be almost invisible. One such 'village' is Mae Sa.

Anchalee Singhanetra-Renard's research in Mae Sa, a village in the Mae Sa valley north of Chiang Mai, dates back over 22 years (see Singhanetra-Renard, 1999). In the mid-1970s, when she started work in the area her chosen study site was a classic Northern Thai farming community. Households grew glutinous rice to meet their subsistence needs, cultivated a small array of cash crops, and engaged in a limited amount of off-farm work to supplement their incomes. The focus of village economy and society was on agriculture and farming. However, being just 13 kilometres from Chiang Mai it wasn't long before land agents began (metaphorically) to knock on people's doors in Mae Sa. From their first tentative visits in the late 1970s, by the mid-1980s land buying had become 'massive'. In 1993 the last village rice field was sold. In the space of less than two decades, Mae Sa had made the transition from farm to non-farm. Today, except for a few local shopkeepers, everyone makes their living beyond the village. "Within a 15-kilometres radius of the village", Singhanetra-Renard writes, "there are golf courses, reservoirs, and elephant shows; orchid, butterfly and snake farms; restaurants, five-star hotels, karaoke bars, brothels, massage parlour and resorts..." (1999, p. 77).

There is considerable circumstantial evidence to indicate that these transformations, relatively minor though they might be at the moment in terms of the totality of the Thai countryside, are having negative impacts on some rural people and on agricultural production. The increase in land prices as land speculators buy up choice plots near main roads may bring large returns to some, but it is making it difficult for the young to remain in farming, even should they so wish.⁹ Furthermore, land speculation has led to an increase in idle land which provides a habitat where pests can multiply. At the same time the construction of housing estates in agricultural areas, along with a significant expansion in

industrial activities in rural spaces, has disturbed drainage patterns and increased the discharge of effluent into water courses that, often, feed rice fields and fish ponds. Around Chiang Mai and other cities, the building of massive ring roads circling the city are displacing rice fields directly by their construction and also in practice by cutting villagers off from their land. More damaging still, the roads act as enormous berms, blocking the natural flow of water across the fields in the rainy season, causing flooding in areas where water would otherwise naturally drain away. There is also evidence – reflected in scores of newspaper articles – of the land conflicts that have emerged as wealth and political power have been used by non-rural classes to colonise and take control of the countryside. In tourist resorts this has often been linked to valuable coastal land, while in villages around fast-growing urban centres it has more usually be associated with land for housing estates.¹⁰

In many villages, and remarkably, these changes are not viewed, necessarily, in negative terms because agriculture is increasingly seen as an occupation with little to recommend it, whether economically (low returns) or culturally (low status). Therefore the decline in agricultural output may be considered a price worth paying if it also leads to an increase in local non-farm employment opportunities. Farmers, always ingenious, also find ways to productively harness the roads that now snake their way through the countryside. For example, recently harvested rice and garlic and peppers are spread out on the tarmac to dry. Nonetheless it is possible to argue that the interpenetration of non-farm activities and non-farm people into rural areas is having negative ramifications for agriculture.

There is an important issue of the degree to which the inter-penetration of rural and urban spaces is undermining agriculture whether through neglect or positive environmental decline. However rather than examine this significant issue the paper now turns to explore the links between the facilities and recreational activities listed by Singhanetra-Renard and noted above, and the visions of the rural past outlined in the earlier portion of the paper. The hotels and elephant camps, even the housing estates and some schools, embed their presence in the countryside by specific reference to a constructed past. In this way, we suggest, authenticity comes from an often ideologically-driven imagining of history. Furthermore, the effects of this process of material infiltration and cognitive colonisation has sometimes been destructive for the ‘true’ – and now endangered – residents of such rural areas.

Perhaps the finest example of how new activities in rural areas have constructed and reworked – both mentally and materially – the countryside to create new economic niches for production and colonisation is the Regent Hotel. A second case study presented here to illustrate the processes of change underway in (some parts of) the countryside is the Tridos School. In this instance we are more intent on showing how, while such projects explicitly draw on ‘tradition’ to justify and give meaning to their presence in the countryside, they are, at the same time also insulated from the ‘real’ rural Thailand. Indeed, as we explain, the effects of such investments may be fundamentally inimical to the interests of ordinary rural dwellers.¹¹

The Regent Hotel: consuming the past

The Regent Chiang Mai (figure 1) is a hotel where modern amenities and 21st century luxuries are hidden behind a carefully constructed traditional veneer. As Jean Bond Rafferty enthuses in her review for *Town and Country* (December 1997) “staying here is a bit like taking a graceful step back into the 700-year-old history of the fabled Lanna kingdom...” The linking of this luxury tourist haven with tradition was an explicit aim of Thai architect Chulathat Kitibuttre who “brought an understanding of rural life to the project”, even equating the hotel’s lobby with the village monastery, “the core of daily life” (Carroll, 1995). Like all hotels that want to demonstrate their local credentials, The Regent emphasises the contribution it makes to the local economy from the use of local artisans and materials in the construction of the hotel through to its employees and working rice farm. A great deal of play is also made of the hotel’s ‘green’ policies (designed by ‘devout conservationist’ Chulathat Kitibuttre to be as ‘eco-friendly as possible’) and involvement with local community projects.

Perhaps the most dramatic reorientation of agriculture in the whole of the North is The Regent Hotel’s ‘working rice farm’. Consisting of just two dozen or so rice fields set in a

small bowl below the hotel, which is itself in the Mae Sa Valley about 25 kilometres north of Chiang Mai,¹² this is agriculture re-engineered for the edification of the hotel's pampered guests (figure 2). Looking out from the terrace or pool, a visitor might believe that this is a hotel parachuted into an area of traditional rice cultivation. The hotel's publicity material talks of rice fields watered by an 'ancient' irrigation system, as if the hotel and its guests are mere spectators in some age-old agricultural performance. The concept of the resort is "as old as the ancient kingdom of Lanna, an agricultural empire unified in the thirteenth century under King Mengrai" (Carroll, 1995).¹³

Closer inspection reveals a number of peculiar facets of production. To begin with, the rice is always at different stages of maturity from recently transplanted to ready for harvesting. Furthermore, the rice fields are not prepared using a rotavator, as they are virtually throughout the north, but with buffalo – animals that are almost extinct in this area of the country. Another odd feature of rice growing is that the transplanted rice is spaced too widely. Finally, the rice fields are irrigated year-round even though there is no obvious way that gravity irrigation could feed the paddys.

While on the surface rice farming here is paraded as 'traditional', the basis and justification for the farm is fundamentally different: it is structured, directed and engineered with consumption in mind, not production. It is contrived. The spacing of the rice plants is intentionally wide so that the hotel's guests can see the reflections of the sky in the standing water, especially at sunset. The cultivation of different fields at different times allows visitors to see rice at different stages of maturity. It also explains why the rice variety Suphanburi 90 is used – a non-photoperiod sensitive rice that can be planted at any time of year and takes 120 days to reach maturity. The rice is harvested about once every 40 days – using a sickle and not a mechanical harvester – or nearly ten times a year. The use of buffaloes rather than mechanical methods of land preparation permits the image of bucolic peace and serenity to be maintained. No guest paying upwards of US\$300 a night would wish to be disturbed by a rotavator. Even the irrigation system is constructed to maintain the image of the traditional. Water from a small lake at the foot of the amphitheatre of rice fields is pumped up to a pond situated at the top of the fields which then overflows into a network of channels taking the water through the rice fields and back to the lake again. The rice is grown using some chemical and organic fertilisers but no pesticides or herbicides. The average yield is reported to be 6,370 kg/ha (a little less but broadly in line with average yields of second rice [ie irrigated rice] in the country as a whole) and the harvested rice – which must be the most expensively produced in the country – is donated to one of the Royal Projects.

This bio-physical engineering of rice agriculture also extends into the human realm. The workers on The Regent's fields wear the *mor hom* – traditional indigo-dyed cotton trousers and jackets. These have become symbolic of Thailand's lost rural innocence. Politically correct academics and NGO workers wear these clothes to demonstrate their solidarity with the peasant masses. Right-on tourists can also buy the garments – and, no doubt, tuck them away in some bottom drawer when they get home. But no farmer wears the *mor hom*; except, of course, those working on The Regent's fields. The workers come from the nearby village of Baan Huai Cho and are paid a daily wage much like any other farm labourers. They wear their *mor hom* uniform to work The Regent's rice fields, and then slip on T-shirt and shorts when they get home.

The Regent's artistic manipulation of nature and farming is clearly not going to lead to a fundamental transformation in the regional economy. It is only a handful of fields, after all.¹⁴ But it does show how traditional agriculture is being adapted to meet the demands of a new rural economy. This is production transformed into a performance carefully choreographed for consumption by (largely) foreign visitors. It is also redolent with the symbolism of the past from the *mor hom* to the buffaloes. In addition, The Regent shows how urban Thais conceptualize the rural, as the owners and designers (both Thai and *farang*) designed the 'rural' experience for the consumption of others – a mythic past performed as a pageant (much like the laser light shows of 'ancient' Sukhothai) – with little connection to the reality of subsistence rice farming. As an indicator of just how successful this pageant is, all of the guests (ten) interviewed by one of the authors believed it was an authentic working

farm, and did not know it was staged.¹⁵

This case study shows clear links with work in Europe on post-productivist agriculture – only more so. The emphasis on the quality of production, from the cultivation of (partially) organic rice to the intentionally anti-mechanical methods employed is in tune with the literature on the restructuring of European agriculture. But the reworking of agriculture so that the means become more important than the ends takes this to a different plane altogether. Whether the fields produce 60 kilograms of padi, or 600 kilograms, or 6,000 kilograms is beside the point. It is the consumption of the visual and, to a lesser extent, the aural side-products of farming which are harnessed here for economic gain. But, and this is an ironic twist in the tale, what have become the side-products in farming Regent-style, namely rice, is then given, *gratis*, to Thailand's poor some of whom, one imagines, have been displaced from their land by just the sort of developments that The Regent represents.

The Tridos School: consuming the present, reconstructing the past

Not far from The Regent Hotel, the Tridos “Three Generation School Village” was constructed just before the economic crash of 1997. While it has since gone bankrupt and been bought out by an international school (a saga in and of itself), the school both literally and metaphorically consumed the rural countryside and idealized versions of ‘village’ life. It also very consciously echoed NGO notions of the countryside as the ‘real’ repository of traditional Thai values, but recrafted for the consumption of the Bangkok elite.

The Tridos School Village (TVS) styled itself as a ‘three generation’ school – combining children, parents and grandparents. Harking back to a past when Thai extended families lived together, the school’s publicity literature spoke of the three generations living together in school-provided housing, but with a distinctly modern Thai twist. It described parents rushing to “...catch the early morning plane to Bangkok; back to work, congested streets, and polluted air until they can return on Friday”. Mothers were projected catching the school van into town for ‘an(other) exciting day of shopping’, while the grandparents helped the children with homework. People might not want to leave the ‘village’ however, as it had an outdoor stadium, soccer field, Olympic sized swimming pool, tennis and squash courts, health spa and other amenities – including opportunities to learn ‘traditional’ village crafts. Recognizing the challenge of getting parents to leave Bangkok for the North, the founders still hoped they would eventually live at the school full time (TVS Literature, 1997).

The Tridos School Village was always referred to as the ‘School Village’ or just ‘The Village’ – explicitly tying the commercial school to a wholly manufactured ‘village’ community. Such was the melding of the real and the imagined Thai rural worlds that it was not immediately clear to one of the authors of this paper which *muban* (village) the school administrators were referring to – the ‘real’ one next door (see below), or the TVS. Unlike an actual village which one is born into, entry to the Tridos ‘village’ required ‘members’ to pay a not inconsiderable 3 million baht (US\$120,000 at the pre-1997 rate of exchange) deposit for a two bedroom apartment, or 6 million for a four bedroom apartment.¹⁶ School fees for primary school were 230,000 baht (US\$9,200) annually, and 240,000 baht for secondary school.¹⁷ Each family had to pay an additional 60,000 baht a year as well to meet various additional service costs. The school was, both financially and in terms of its ideology, aimed at the Thai elite, with a forbidding price tag – one year’s tuition and boarding was estimated by the *International Herald Tribune* at more than seven times Thailand’s per capita income in 1997.

A core element in the logic and ideology that underpinned the school was to provide Thailand’s elite with an opportunity to enjoy the “beautiful rural” land, while “maintaining traditional Thai customs” that nonetheless were carefully adapted to the rigours of globalization and the demand for a comfortable as well as an authentic rural lifestyle. Both the school literature and teachers at the school spoke of having the highest international standards while maintaining their Thai cultural heritage. Much of the school’s promotional literature played on the fears of Thai parents that their children would lose their “Thainess” and cultural identity if they studied abroad, something that would be avoided by studying at the TVS (*International Herald Tribune*, February 11, 1997).

While the Tridos School Village ultimately failed, it presents a very clear illustration of the consumption of rural life by Thailand's urban elite (as opposed to largely overseas tourists in The Regent Hotel case study). Located in the North, where land speculation by the same Bangkok elites has displaced hundreds of rural villagers, the Tridos School bought together Thai notions of family life, an idealized rural village, and fears of cultural assimilation in the face of globalisation. Using language harkening back to an idealised past, potential students and their families were promised an idealised village setting, but carefully modified and upgraded for a cosmopolitan Bangkok elite – internet access, air-conditioning, sports and spa facilities. The Tridos School Village promised to unite two competing notions – a protected rural lifestyle, where traditional Thai values were preserved, as well as 21st century education with the latest technology and student-centred teaching methods. The marketing of the rural, and the idealisation of tradition, is part of the TVS story. But we are also interested in exploring the conflicts and tensions that emerged between the Tridos School Village and the real village next door, Ban Lek.

Built on prime agricultural land near the village of Ban Lek,¹⁸ the Tridos School Village not only 'consumed' the countryside and rural notions in its discourses, but also consumed the land physically as well. While the school literature spoke of living in harmony with nature, hiking in the surrounding hills and learning about the environment as an essential part of the curriculum and 'village' life, the reality was quite different. The TVS was built right next to the main weir feeding the irrigation canals for Ban Lek. A picturesque setting, 'perfect' for canoeing and other sports, the construction of the school itself, and later pesticide and herbicide applications to the grounds are blamed by many villagers in Ban Lek for the pollution of one of the main water sources for their rice fields. A traditional feature of Northern Thai agriculture – a weir and *müang fai* system – was appropriated by the TVS to create an idealized setting for the 'village' – a view of the mountains, and water flowing nearby. While the TVS extracted water from the irrigation source, the neo-villagers of the TVS did not take part in the traditionally community-based repair and maintenance of the *müang fai* system, nor the ceremonies honouring the water spirits (which might explain to some why the school failed). The school in this way, while parading its traditional credentials, in reality undermined rural production, eroded the local productive base, and compromised the social and cultural structures that are part-and-parcel of rural life and livelihoods.

Held up as a 'lighthouse' model for Thai education, the administrators and teachers at the TVS, as well as the literature, talked about providing a 'model' that other schools could use. The TVS took the standard Thai curriculum, and modified it to be more student-centred, and not unrelated, more technologically intensive. When asked about the relevance to the neighbouring 'real' village of Ban Lek, the TVS school administrators asserted that the school of Ban Lek could use many ideas from the TVS to improve their students' education. The headmaster of the school in Ban Lek, however, noted with some irony that since his entire annual budget was less than the school fees for one pupil at the TVS, he doubted they would be able to implement any of these tantalising 'innovations'. At a time when Ban Lek school teachers were buying chalk out of their own pockets, TVS teachers were enjoying the latest world class instructional technology. While the school at Ban Lek had not a single computer, TVS students in primary school were to be issued individual laptops. As the TVS was being wired with room to room and desk-to-desk computer networks, the school in Ban Lek could not even afford a new coat of paint for its lunchroom.

When asked about the relationship with Ban Lek, the administration of the Tridos School Village promised that their own students would go and teach the local village children art classes and other subjects – perhaps an unintentional natural expression of traditional hierarchical patron-client relationships in Thai society. A couple of scholarships were to be offered to local village children to attend the TVS, but the impact of the gap between their own relative poverty, and the affluence of the TVS was never mentioned. As it turned out, the greatest benefit of the TVS for (real) villagers was in the form of jobs cleaning toilets and tending the grounds for the benefit of the few "village members" of the TVS.

While The Regent Hotel represents an example of how production, consumption and notions of modern and traditional are reconstructed for people on holiday, the Tridos School Village represents something rather different. While it ultimately failed, the TVS was attempting to create an idealized past in the present life of the Bangkok elite. Rather than focusing on consumers of leisure like The Regent Hotel, the market for the TVS was aimed at parents who desired a fully modern, yet fully Thai education – without the problems that go with a congested city like Bangkok, none of the compromises entailed in moving to a real village, nor the threat of Westernisation by sending a child to study abroad. In trying to create the Tridos Village School, the founder and others took urban Thai notions of what a village should be like, and created it out of the ‘empty’ rice fields in Chiang Mai. The TVS tried to create from the ground-up the idealized Thai village, and failed spectacularly to do so. While the countryside was consumed physically, the goal of the production of a viable neo-traditional ‘village’ ultimately proved elusive. Moreover, while ultimately failing, the TVS also managed to compromise the real village next door, undermining agricultural production while offering unskilled service sector jobs to poor villagers displaced from the land.

Production, consumption and imagination: reworking the rural

In the developed world it has become fairly commonplace to write of rural areas making the transition from spheres of production to landscapes of consumption. Processes of counter-urbanisation, the de-localisation of work, and the profound structural changes that have occurred in rural areas have led to an important re-appraisal of the role and place of rural areas in national economies, and of the role of rural studies. Coincident with these changes has come a concern with how the ‘rural idyll’ has been constructed.

While these debates are now well embedded in the literature on the developed world, the same cannot be said for studies of the developing world. But, and as we have tried to show with reference to Thailand, it is not the case that rural areas of the developing world have been immune from such processes. Indeed, it can be argued that their presence and effects are that much starker and more pronounced because of the rapidity with which such changes are occurring. Studies characteristically show that 10 or even five years can be sufficient to transform rural villages from communities where subsistence production and the seasonal demands of farming dominate lives and livelihoods to places where life has become highly commodified and where non-farm activities and incomes dominate farming. Scholars who have conducted longitudinal studies characteristically comment on the pace of change and their inability to anticipate that change.

It is important to appreciate that the experience of Thailand, while it does resonate with some aspects of the debate over rural restructuring in the North, is importantly different. Furthermore, we would suggest that work on agrarian transitions in the non-Western world more widely gives lie to the view that a single explanatory sequence has general utility (see, for example, Francks *et al.*, 1999 on East Asia; and Bryceson, 1996; Bryceson and Jamal, 1997; and Bryceson *et al.*, 2000 on Africa). It is not just the pace of transformation – from farm to non-farm, from subsistence to cash, and from production to consumption – that is remarkable. The bases of these transformations, arguably, are also qualitatively different from the narrative evident from Western Europe (and, especially, the UK).¹⁹

To begin with, households in the South demonstrate an ability – and a desire – to creatively combine pre-productivist, productivist and post-productivist systems. Thus they may simultaneously embrace the subsistence farming of rice (pre-productivist), intensive production of (say) maize for sale (productivist), and the cultivation of organic vegetables for market (post-productivist). Bryceson writes of the “enigmatic dual character” of peasantries “as both partially autonomous and highly vulnerable producers” (2000, p. 300). The mainstream literature on rural change seems oddly cosseted from alternative histories of rural change (although see Byres, 1996 for a fine exception) or the ways in which global economic change and local rural change intersect. One of the lessons would seem to be that while even peasants are living in the global, agrarian transitions are historically (or, more broadly, geographically) contingent. To quote Bryceson (an Africanist) again:

“ It is indeed strange that western social science has abandoned the project of tracing peasants’ historical encounter with industrial and post-industrial societies just when this encounter seems to have reached its most critical juncture – when peasants’ continuing existence is at stake. Is this the fickleness of academic fashion or an evasive guilt complex – or worse, indifference moulded by the global economy of the affluent?” (2000, p. 322).

Second, while some of the usual indicators of post-productivism are to be found in the Thai countryside – the consumption of rural spaces, the increasing presence and role of environmental NGOs, and on-farm diversification, for example – the underlying meaning of such indicators may be very different from that assumed in the Northern (and particularly, UK) context. Occupational multiplicity has always played an important part in maintaining sustainable livelihoods, and just because we can ‘tick off’ indicators we should not assume that this means that agrarian transitions in Thailand (or elsewhere in the South) are likely to mirror those in the North. This can be exemplified in the case of Laos, neighbouring Thailand and one of Asia’s poorest and most ‘traditional’ countries. Here many farmers use organic systems of agricultural production. However while some farmers can be broadly defined as pre-productivist and largely subsistence, others are using their organic credentials as a marketing tool to add value to their crops and, in these terms, are post-productivist. Organic farming is seen as one of the few comparative advantages that Laos can sell as it negotiates the transition to the market. The difficulty of applying the post-productivist framework to Laos, then, is that the same ‘indicator’ reflects very different agricultural regimes.²⁰

While this paper is partly about the shift from farm to non-farm, we have endeavoured to link this with a consideration of the construction of the rural in Thailand. For we believe that an understanding of the structural changes sweeping through (some) areas of rural Southeast Asia needs to be embedded within the wider debate over the character of the rural past and the nature of the rural community. As in the West, the rural idyll has a tight hold on the imaginations of many Thais (and non-Thais). Yet there are reasons seriously to question its veracity (again, as in the West). And while notions of the rural idyll bear more than a passing resemblance to similar debates in Europe, there is, again, a special quality of the discourse in Thailand that needs to be acknowledged.

Furthermore, not only is it the case that the debate over the Thai rural idyll has its own qualities and character; the implications are, if anything, even more important because this debate is not merely an academic and aesthetic one; it has tangible and significant impacts on rural development policy and practice, and on livelihoods. As we have attempted to show, the New Localism has the power and potential to transform the way in which the state, and its agents, intervene in rural areas. When an imagined rurality comes into direct contact with the ‘real’ rural the effects can be (but not necessarily so) deleterious for people striving to make a living in the countryside. In short, the intersection of imagination with reality is both academically interesting and practically pertinent.

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Figures

- Figure 1 The Regent Hotel, Chiang Mai designed and built to mirror traditional Thai architecture
- Figure 2 The Regent Hotel's 'working' rice farm

Notes

¹ Wilson's paper (2001) on post-productivism is agriculture focused and highlights the shift from farming as an enterprise whose driving rationale is the increase of output to one where the quality of farming occupies centre stage. In this paper we see post-productivism in rather wider terms, incorporating both agricultural production in rural areas and work in the non-farm sector.

² See Bryceson et al., 2000 for a global developing world perspective.

³ In other words, there has been a tendency to play down the extent to which non-farm work, whether local or extra-local, impinges on agricultural practices. This can be seen reflected, for example, in abandoned or idle riceland in high population density areas, the rapid spread of some mechanical innovations (like the rotavator), and in changes in cropping pattern.

⁴ The notion of the 'righteous' monarch is well established in the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia and also resonates for the Muslim sultanates of island Southeast Asia. While absolute monarchies have long gone from all the territories of the region with the exception of Brunei Darrusalam, governments continue to gain legitimacy from being righteous. It can be convincingly argued that the reason why the ruling State Peace and Development Council in Burma (Myanmar) has lost legitimacy is because its leadership are no longer righteous (see Rigg et al., 1999). The ultimate demise of the SPDC, in Buddhist terms, is sealed.

⁵ Although critics have argued that this is exactly what he does. See Hong Lysa 1991.

⁶ And in this regard mirrors much of the post-developmental work of scholars such as Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson who offer a devastating (but ultimately unconvincing) critique of present conditions without suggesting any viable alternative to the existing state of affairs. See Bebbington, 2000 for a discussion.

⁷ It is questionable whether Chatthip was ever concerned with providing a grounded and empirically informed reinterpretation of history. For François Molle (personal communication) Chatthip's book is

a political statement. He is attempting to re-privilege the local over the national, the national over the international, and culture over economics.

⁸ This was given a considerable fillip during Thailand's economic crisis of 1997-1998 which many commentators saw as a result of Thailand's overly-intimate engagement with the global economy.

⁹ Which many do not. See Rigg, 2001.

¹⁰ To see an assortment of such disputes, use the *Bangkok Post*'s search facility (<http://www.bangkokpost.net/>).

¹¹ Both of these case studies draw on visits by the authors and discussions with local people and those involved in the two projects.

¹² And close to Anchalee Singhaentra-Renard's study village.

¹³ King Mengrai (r.1259-1317) and King Ramkhamhaeng ruled different Tai kingdoms at the same time and, along with King Ngam Muang of Phayao are said to have sworn a pact of eternal friendship in around 1280.

¹⁴ But it is not the only 'working farm' geared to tourists in the area. A little further up the Mae Sa Valley towards Samoeng is the Mae Sa Craft Village. Here tourists can not only watch the process of rice cultivation but they can also become farmers for a day and learn how to transplant rice and battle with a buffalo-drawn plough.

¹⁵ Although this may also be a comment on how willing tourists are to be deceived in the pursuit of an 'authentic' experience.

¹⁶ Returnable after a minimum of 5 years membership – although the TVS did not last that long in the end.

¹⁷ Not including the lease fee for the notebook computer students were issued from the fifth grade upwards.

¹⁸ Where one of the authors has done extensive research; Ritchie, 1996b.

¹⁹ To some extent the points below reflect critiques in the literature on rural restructuring in the North.

²⁰ These comments are based on fieldwork currently underway in three provinces of Laos. The research is being led by the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) with assistance from Jonathan Rigg.